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AUTHOR Falk, Carolyn R.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

It has been predicted that, due primarily to parental divorce or separation, almost one-half of all children born in 1980 will live a considerable time with only one parent before they reach the age of 18. A qualitative research study was conducted which asked 41 middle school children for their perceptions on the effects of divorce on school life. Subjects included gifted and non-gifted students from intact and non-intact families. Subjects' views on what schools should do for children from recently divorced homes fell on a continuum from "do nothing" to "provide special classes and programs." Gifted students saw the effects of divorce in more depth and scope than did non-gifted students. Children from non-intact homes were able to define their parents as separate entities while those from intact homes saw their parents as single units. Because gifted children have demonstrated a difference in their perceptions of divorce, a different means of support may be needed in working with these children. At the difficult time of parental divorce, it appears that the school becomes a stabilizing support system for children. School personnel need to be aware of the child's preference for the role of the school. (NB)

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CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON SCHOOL LIFE

Falk, C.R.; Renzulli, J.S.; Rogers, V.R.; Keller, E.D. & Gable, R.K.

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Falk, C.R.; Renzulli, J.S.; Rogers, V.R.; Keller, E.D. & Gable, R.K.

Abstract:

Almost half of all children born in 1980 will live a considerable time with only one parent before they reach the age of eighteen (Brown, 1980), due primarily to parental divorce or separation (Moles, 1982).

Forty-one middle school children were asked for their perceptions on the effects of divorce on school life (Falk, 1986). The phenomenon of divorce, which affects all children (Allers, 1981) has not been well analyzed by children's cognitive and moral levels of reasoning, therefore, gifted and non-gifted students from intact and not intact families, participated in this study.

Gifted students saw the effects of divorce in more depth and scope than non-gifted youngsters. Children from not intact homes were able to define their parents as separate entities while those from intact homes saw their parents as single units.

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Almost half of all children born in 1980 will live a considerable time with only one parent before they reach the age of eighteen (Brown, 1980), due primarily to parental divorce or separation (Moles, 1982).

Forty-one middle school children were asked for their perceptions on the effects of divorce on school life (Falk, 1986). Gifted and non-gifted students from intact and not intact families, participated in this qualitative research study. Previous research (Brown, 1980; Guidubaldi et al., 1983, 1984, 1986) Hetherington, 1972, 1979, 1981; Wallerstein & Kelly,1976, 1979, 1980, 1981) has been concerned with the perceptions of children from not intact homes.

The phenomenon of divorce, which affects all children (Allers, 1981), has not been well analyzed by children's cognitive and moral levels of reasoning. In this study, gifted students had a greater knowledge, empathy and broader point of view than the non-gifted (Falk, in press). See Table 1.

School was seen as a work and social place and as a moderating or change treatment center. The participants' views on what schools should do for children from recently divorced homes, fell on a continuum of "do nothing" to "provide special classes and programs", Schools were seen as a place where a child from divorced parents could receive help or pretend nothing had changed. The need not to be singled out as different evident among all the children's responses.

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Table 1
Non Gifted vs Gifted Responses

Question	Non Gifted	Gifted
What is research?	When you look up stuff.	There is primary research and secondary research. Primary research is when you are actually doing something out in the field, where you are learning something that has not been learned before. Secondary research is when you're learning what other people have done, in other words, what has been done by them primarily.
Good effects?	Fighting would stop	Once you have survived a crisis, you have self confidence and know that you can cope with future crises.
Family	Living together	Working together
Divorce	Not wanting to live together	Not being able to work together
Effects on School	Cognitive	Affective
Mother/Child	Mother is telling the child not to worry.	The child is comforting the mother.

When asked to write a speech containing recommendations for school policy toward children from recently divorce parents, a gifted child from a divorced home responded,

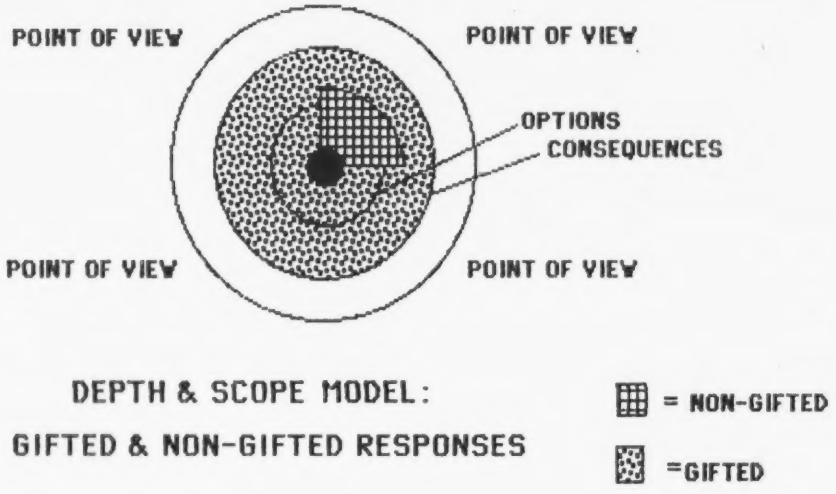
> Though this is a significant problem, it is only temporary. With time the child and his or her parents will work out the problem by themselves.
>
> The problem at hand is that children are unavoidable mixing their home life with their school life. By trying to help the student by speaking to him or her in school, you are encouraging this; you are mixing his or her school life with the home life.
>
> .....The best way to help a child in this situation is simply not to be

frustrated with him or her when he or she is upset.

Gifted children had a significantly greater amount of words in their writing samples, $t(39)=2.13$ $p<.05$. Their responses on a subtest of The defining Issues Test (DIT) (Rest, 1972) which measures Kohlbergian levels of moral reasoning was significantly higher, $t(39)=2.18$ $^{*}p<.05$. The school attendance record, $t(39)=3.16$ $^{**}p<.001$,and the families socio-economic status $t(39)$ 3.18 $^{***}p<.000$, was significantly higher for gifted students as compared to the non-gifted sample. An ANOVA analysis revealed that the school setting was significant. The city school had a significantly lower attendance record, $F(2,38)=4.30$ $^{**}p<.001$,and lower family socio-economic status $F(2,38)=7.37$ $^{**}p<.001$, than the private school. The writing samples were significantly longer from the private school as compared to the city and suburban school, $F(2,38)=7.18$ $p<.001$.

A model was developed that depicts the difference between gifted and non-gifted children's responses.

Figure 1. Model depicting responses of gifted and non-gifted students.



A full circle represents the responses of the youngsters in this study. The length of the radius represents the depth of options and consequences, and the gifted youngsters had a longer radius. The degrees in the circumference represents the various points of view. The 90 degrees depicts the egocentric unidimensional perceptions of the non-gifted, while gifted children's responses correlate to a full 360 degrees.

Children from not intact homes responded differently than those from intact homes.

Table 2

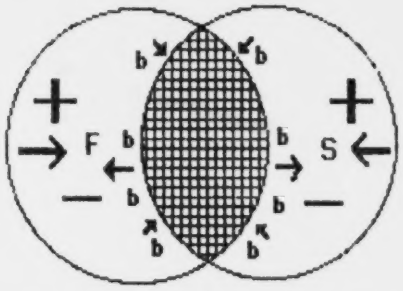
Not Intact vs. Intact Homes Responses

Issue	Not Intact	Intact
Terms used	Custody battle	Argue
	File for divorce	Separate
	Lawyer's fees	Love
	Judge's rulings	Responsibility
Family membership	Grandparents	Mom and dad
	Siblings/Pets	
Parents	Separate entities	One unit
Concerns	Money	Grades
	Well being of custodial parent	Friends
Effects on School	Affective	Cognitive

Building on Levinger's (1979) model of the person/other relationship, a model depicting the family/school relationship was developed. Levinger overlapped two equal sized circles. One circle represents a person and the other represents the spouse. The marriage is the overlap. There are barriers or forces that keep the marriage intact. This also occurs in the family and school relationship circles. Common goals, communication and social pressures tend to reinforce the

child's, comfort in school. The two part model developed in this study shows, in part one the intact family/school relationship.

Figure 2. Model depicting an intact family/school relationship.

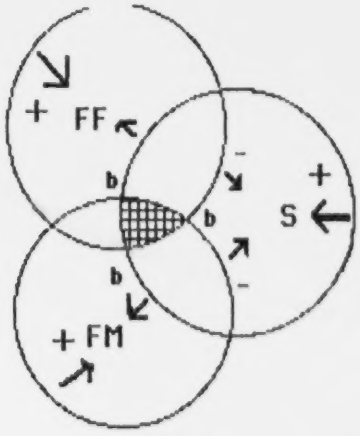


F=FAMILY
S=SCHOOL
b=BARRIERS

SCHEMA OF A FAMILY-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP

When the parents divorce, the family circle splits in two, causing a smaller overlap, a three way communication system, goals not in common and less social support for the family as a unit. The second part of this model depicts the effect of the family split.

Figure 3. Model depicting not intact family/school relationship.



F=FAMILY – {FF=FATHER, FM=MOTHER}
S=SCHOOL
b=BARRIERS

SCHEMA OF A DIVORCED FAMILY-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP

Due to this change of perspective, the child from a divorced family, sees the parents as separate entities. A closer relationship and feelings of an emotional partnership with each parent was reported.

CONCLUSIONS

The rate of divorce is increasing. Children perceive the world and its phenomenon as individuals trying to make sense out of their environment. Gifted children possess a higher level of cognitive skills and a more advanced level of moral reasoning. The perceptions of children identified as gifted was not better or worse than those not identified as gifted, merely different. Gifted children were able to see more reasons, options and consequences to the divorce phenomenon as compared to the non-gifted subjects. Their viewpoints were broader and represented more views than their own. Non-gifted children expressed egocentric views that had short termed consequences.

Children from intact homes saw their parents as a single caring unit. Children from not intact homes saw the family also as a group of caring people, but the membership included grandparents, siblings and pets. Their parents were seen as separate entities and a concern for financial security and custodial parental well being was evident.

> The border between childhood and adolescence is not an easy one to cross. Crossing this border at the time of parental divorce may be especially difficult because emotional and physical supports for growing up are centered in the nuclear family (Springer & Wallerstein, 1983, p.15).

Schools are offering numerous support groups comprised of the child's age-mate peers. Gifted children have demonstrated a difference in their perceptions of divorce. A different means of support is recommended. At the difficult time of parental divorce it appears that schools become a stabilizing support system for children. School personnel need to become aware of the child's preferences for the role of the school.

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